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SUBJECT: GPC JITTERS OVER APRIL 2009 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

REF: SANAA 1458

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Although the ruling party is expected to win easily in the upcoming parliamentary elections, President Saleh has recently expressed fears about how the opposition will portray his actions during the campaign. Some speculate that he is overstating these fears to avoid taking actions he does not want to take. Others, however, believe that, while he knows victory is within his grasp, he is more concerned about the legitimacy provided by a wide margin of victory in elections that are seen as free and fair. END SUMMARY.

WHAT'S SALEH AFRAID OF?

¶2. (C) On a number of recent occasions, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh framed his actions, or refusals to act, in terms of how the opposition would use his actions against him in the April 2009 parliamentary elections. With the Supreme Council for Elections and Referenda (SCER) firmly controlled by the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and the continued struggles of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) coalition, fears of a GPC loss in the elections seem unreasonable. Post's interlocutors overwhelmingly concur that the GPC will easily win the elections. Sarah Phillips of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) believes that even with a "perfect storm" of negative factors working against it, the GPC can't lose in April. Hassan Ali Saif of the Political Development Forum, a local NGO, when asked if there was any chance the GPC would lose, snarled derisively. Some observers think Saleh might not be as anxious as he claims to be. According to Mohamed Naji al-Shaif, a Yemeni businessman and the son of the paramount sheikh of the Bakil tribal confederation, "Sometimes Saleh exploits the Brothers (Islah) to avoid doing what he doesn't want to do." (NOTE: As an example of this tactic, Saleh attributes his reluctance to crack down on extremists in certain tribal areas to his fear, alleged or actual, of opposition from Islah. END NOTE.)

THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY

¶3. (C) Notwithstanding the possibility that Saleh may be overplaying his fears to manipulate foreign partners, his strong-arm tactics in forming the SCER (reftel) and other actions indicate genuine concern about the elections. On October 28, an energy company executive told the Ambassador that his company had been given clear instructions to get their gas stream online before mid-April or not at all, since the ROYG needed some "good news" right before the elections.

¶4. (C) The GPC wants the April 2009 elections to be perceived, both by its domestic population and the influential donor community, as free and fair. Deputy Prime Minister for Defense and Security Affairs Rashad al-Alimi stated in a November 10 security-focused meeting with foreign ambassadors, "Although it is actually to the advantage of the GPC to delay the elections because of its current parliamentary majority, we are subject to the laws and the constitution to keep the elections on time." The GPC fears that without the elections, the legitimacy of the current regime could be brought into question. Nabil Basha, a GPC member of parliament, told PolOff on November 4, "The

elections must happen on time. It would be better if other parties participated, but it's their fault if they don't. What's important is that the elections happen, and that they happen on time."

15. (C) JMP members say they do not want the elections to proceed without reforms. According to Dr. Muhammad Abdulmalik al-Mutawakkil, deputy chairman of the JMP's Union of Popular Forces (UPF) party and a professor at Sana'a University, "a flawed election is worse than no election." A British diplomat told PolOff that, in a new development, both the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) and Islah plan to boycott the elections. Islah has also begun a campaign in the provinces to inform its supporters about the boycott and urge them to stay home on election day. By casting doubt on the legitimacy of the process, the JMP could benefit more from sitting out than from participating.

16. (C) According to another British diplomat, Saleh believes that the GPC must win by a percentage at least in the mid-eighties. She added that during the 2006 presidential election, Saleh groused that a margin of victory like that garnered by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2005 (88.6%) was not sufficient. Saleh wants to burnish his legacy, not see it weakened by what he perceives as anemic electoral turnout. According to Sarah Phillips at NDI, a GPC win percentage in the fifties or sixties would be seen by the ruling party as an abject failure.

COMMENT

17. (C) Observers expect the GPC to win comfortably in the upcoming parliamentary elections, but sometimes winning isn't enough. Saleh wants his party to not only win the elections, but win them by a substantial margin that will vindicate his leadership. At the same time, he wants the elections to be deemed free and fair both domestically and internationally. Saleh believes his continued mandate depends on achieving a significant win in a "real" election. END COMMENT.

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